

Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear, from Ancient Times to the Present* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 376 pp., \$30 cloth.

*Pomegranate* readers who are familiar with Ronald Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Witchcraft*—whose twentieth anniversary was just celebrated by the publication of a *Festschrift* volume, *Magic and Witchery in the Modern West* (2019)—as well as essays and books touching on the development of modern Pagan traditions of Wicca and Druidry, might be expecting more of the same. But *The Witch* is not that book. Propelled partially by Hutton's own concerns about the persistence of witch-hunting and witchcraft executions in parts of Africa and Asia, it begins in a more contemporary framework with a chapter titled "The Global Context" but ultimately circles back to the problems of studying the European and witch trials, specifically those of the British Isles.

First, of course, he must deal with the multiple means of the word "witch," with which he has been involved for decades. First and still primary is "worker of harmful magic," second the so-called "white witch" or "good witch," third the Pagan witch (often capitalized), and fourth the symbol of feminine empowerment (ix-x). His choice is to use "witch" primarily in the first sense, re-defining the second (and all sort of folk-healers, witch-doctors, medicine men and women, cunning folk, and the like) as "service magicians," insofar as the client-service aspect of their work outweigh any "religious" or priestly function. This magic/religion distinction has been an anthropological staple—it often works, but there are cultural contexts in which it breaks down. These exceptions (Navajo traditional religion is one, ancient Egypt—which he acknowledges—is another) do, however, fall outside the areas which Hutton is discussing. In addition, he discusses late-twentieth-century controversies within the field of anthropology itself, when some anthropologists challenged the imposition of European categories such as "magic" and "witchcraft" on societies elsewhere in the world (5-6). These challenges, he notes, had the unintended consequence of splitting anthropology from the historical study of European witchcraft for at least a generation, although he now sees a new era of cross-cultural comparison and interdisciplinary cooperation underway.

Furthermore, European categories were employed elsewhere, thanks to colonization, in former colonies where “a feature of the persecution of alleged witches was the manner in which selected features of Christianity were borrowed from the colonial rulers and integrated with traditional concepts of the witch . . . In 2005 it was estimated that Africa now had hundreds of thousands of ‘prophets’ attached to native denominations of Christianity [also known as African Independent Churches] who claimed the inspiration of the Holy Ghost and other spirits to detect the hidden causes of misfortune, especially witchcraft” (30, 32).

Subsequent chapters examine ancient Mediterranean and Middle Eastern views on magic and witchcraft; the history of shamanism and its study; ceremonial magic and its Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Greek roots; the Wild Hunt; and the relationship between European witches and the fairy folk. In his organization, Hutton sees the book as a series of concentric circles—first global, then regional and finally British. In the last “circle,” he discusses, for example, the relationship between witches, witch-hunts, and the invention of “Celticity” as a cultural category that might be overlain with less concern about evil witches and more concern about malevolent fairies.

While the author organized the book by concentric circles, its depth of research and amount of information caused me to propose a different strategy for reading it. After making my first skim, I decided that the best way to utilize *The Witch* as a research tool was to read the Author’s Note, Introduction, and Conclusion, followed by chapter 1, “The Global Context.” The rest might then be read as a reference book, in whatever order fits a reader’s needs. In sum, given the aforementioned conflicts over whether the category of “witch” can be applied cross-culturally, *The Witch* makes a strong case that yes, ethnographic and contemporary cross-cultural comparisons are useful to the scholar working on early modern witch beliefs and witch trials—and vice-versa—and it supports that case in encyclopedic detail.

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